



"Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it."
—Flannery O'Connor

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Strangers to the Truth (Part One)

The June 2017 issue of *National Geographic Magazine* contains a story, "Why We Lie: The Science Behind Our Deceptive Ways," which begins like this:

In the fall of 1989 Princeton University welcomed into its freshman class a young man named Alexi Santana, whose life story the admissions committee had found extraordinarily compelling.

He had barely received any formal schooling. He had spent his adolescence almost entirely on his own, living outdoors in Utah, where he'd herded cattle, raised sheep, and read philosophy. Running in the Mojave Desert, he had trained himself to be a distance runner.

Santana quickly became something of a star on campus. Academically too he did well, earning A's in nearly every course. His reserved manner and unusual background suffused him with an enigmatic appeal. When a suite [room] mate asked Santana how his bed always seemed to be perfectly made, he answered that he slept on the floor. It seemed perfectly logical that someone who had

spent much of his life sleeping outdoors would have no fondness for a bed.

Except that Santana's story was a lie. About 18 months after he enrolled, a woman recognized him as somebody she'd known as Jay Huntsman at Palo Alto High School in California six years earlier. But even that wasn't his real name. Princeton officials eventually learned that he was actually James Hogue, a 31-year-old who had served a prison sentence in Utah for possession of stolen tools and bike parts. He was taken away from Princeton in handcuffs.

"O, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." This quotation comes from Sir Walter Scott's poem, "Marmion," published in 1808. Back when poems and lyrics rhymed, he used "deceive," a synonym for lying, to make it rhyme with "weave." We still use a lot of synonyms for lying, probably due to what we read and hear every day coming from our leaders in government.

Do we prevaricate? Are we mendacious? Do we dissemble? Do we tend to equivocate and obfuscate? Then there are fibs, white lies, evasions, and less-than-truthful statements. Why do we try to cloud the meaning of lying? We know it is wrong, but if we call it something else, something that is not so obviously "lying," is it less wrong?

How many times do we hear, "You don't say!" or "Really?" Sometimes we begin our sentences with, "Honestly, . . ." We respond to someone by saying, "I hear you" and "You know what I mean?" We are so used to lying or being lied to that we seek affirmation that our words or somebody else's are true.

What is the first lie recorded in the Bible? Most of us would answer with [Genesis 3:4](#), where [Satan](#) says to Eve, "You will not surely die." There are some, however, who would argue that the first lie appears one verse earlier. In verse 3, in response to the serpent's question, Eve says, "[God](#) has said, 'You shall not eat [the fruit], nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" What God

actually said in [Genesis 2:17](#) is, ". . . of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." He said nothing about touching it.

Was her enhancing of God's command with "nor shall you touch it" Eve's way of broadening the barrier against [sin](#)? Perhaps she told herself, "How can I eat the fruit if I never even touch it?" Or was this simply an exaggeration, adding to God's Word? Some early Jewish writers wrote that, after Eve said this, Satan pushed her against the tree and said, "See, you touched it, and you didn't die," implying, "Now you can safely eat of it."

A case can be made for both Eve's enhancing of God's command and her adding to it, but either one illustrates that straying from the truth is a minefield—even if it is a sincere attempt to "strengthen" God's command. He does not need our help. When He tells us in [Exodus 20:16](#) not to bear false witness against our neighbor, that is what He means. *The Contemporary English Version* reads simply, "Do not tell lies about others." That is our rule. We do not need to add to it.

But can we expand our understanding of it? Absolutely! As in all of the commandments, Christ has expanded their scope to include the spiritual intent; the ninth commandment covers all forms of deceit, not just making false statements against another in a legal case.

Without a doubt, when Satan told Eve, "You will not surely die," he was lying through his teeth! As the apostle Paul writes in [Romans 6:23](#), "The wages of sin is death." Death usually does not happen right away, but at some point, we all die because of our sins. What is frightening is that Eve had heard God's edict with her own ears, yet she still fell for the serpent's obvious lie! "Oh, we won't die? Well, okay then."

[Jesus](#) tells us plainly that Satan is a liar and the father of lies in [John 8:44](#). The New King James Version heads the section of verses 30-36 as, "The Truth Shall Make You Free." This passage brings to mind Jack Nicholson in the movie, *A Few Good Men*, where he snarls from the witness stand, "You can't handle the truth!" And he is right. Not long ago, I heard two different

people—twice in the same week—say, "Truth is relative." Many people think "truth" depends on the situation, what is at stake, and who they are. But, as Christians, we need to see what Christ has to say about truth.

In [John 8:30](#), He is described as speaking to a crowd in the Temple, which included a number of Pharisees, and "many believed in Him." "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (verses 31-32).

The Pharisees answered, saying that they were never in bondage (verse 33), a response that is ridiculous in so many ways. They, again, misunderstood Jesus, as He had made the spiritual point that they were slaves to sin (verse 34). Yet consider their physical history: They had been slaves in Egypt, and in the fifteen hundred years since God freed them, they had been under the thumb of the Chaldeans, Persians, Greeks, and at the time, the Romans! Obviously, they were strangers to the truth, just as so many are today.

Next time, we will discover just how insidious deceit is—in fact, it is present in just about every sin we commit.

- Mike Ford (1955-2021)

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Our Trusted Source of Truth \(Part One\)](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, cuing in on the "What is truth?" episode in John 18:32-37, suggests that John wants us to ask that question of ourselves. Pilate seemed to believe that all the charges against Jesus were built up on lies and trumped-up charges. Jesus, conversely, was the perfect witness and embodiment of the truth—the truth and the way to eternal life. Pontius Pilate was a Roman prefect, probably involved in intrigue and shady backroom deals. The reason behind Pilate's question—the tone of voice he used when he asked "What is truth?", has been a matter of perennial speculation: Did he

ask it sincerely, sarcastically, wistfully, curiously, or impatiently? Pilate realized that Jesus did not have a political motive. Perhaps, Pilate asked the question in a skeptical, world-weary, futile manner, despairing of ever finding a true legitimate answer, feeling that everybody shades their own realities to suit themselves and their preconceptions. Deceit is our most grave problem as we continue in the world and in the church. Post-modern standards deny the existence of truth. Some secular humanists, who control much of higher education, feel that some truths (as practiced by Christians) should not be tolerated. The Olivet Prophecy places deceit at the top of the dangers confronting Christians, who, at the end-times, will be living in the deluge of information age or the disinformation age, powerful enough to deceive the very elect. Satan wants to flood the environment of our minds with a deluge of lies. If a person practices what he preaches, he is likely to tell the truth; we judge by the fruit produced. We have to analyze everything we see and hear, filtering it through the standards and principles of the Holy Scripture, realizing that we have generally not been taught to do this. False teachers tend to chip away at truth one little piece at

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Whole Truth](#)

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

Most of us have heard the courtroom mantra, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." John Reid, however, applies these criteria to our behavior, showing that many of us shy away from "nothing but the truth"!

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